

Jewish Immigrant Experiences in America

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Objective:

At the conclusion of each lesson, students should be able to:

Discuss and write about how culture and socioeconomic status, in connection with religion, shaped immigrant experiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Context:

This lesson is primarily intended to supplement the study of immigration (especially late 19th and early 20th century) in U.S. History classes. The use of primary sources and film is intended to create a sense of empathy in students, so that they can identify with the issues of establishing an identity faced by these groups.

Kentucky Academic Expectations:

2.16 Students observe, analyze, and interpret human behaviors, social groupings, and institutions to better understand people and the relationships among individuals and groups.

2.20 Students recognize continuity and change in historic events, conditions, trends, and issues in order to make decisions for a better future.

Preparation:

Prior to teaching this, I recommend the following background information:

From the National Humanities Center website (www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080):

Divining America: Religion and the National Culture:

19th Century Link -- "'The American Jewish Experience: Immigration and Acculturation"

20th Century Link - "The American Jewish Experience: Antisemitism and Assimilation"

The two articles on Jewish experiences are by Jonathan D. Sarna and Jonathan Golden of Brandeis University. They are very informative and have suggestions for guiding student discussion. The articles, which are from the National Humanities Center, give detailed information on the central issue of identity, and how being "American" and yet retaining their Jewish heritage was a challenging issue for Jewish immigrants (as it was for most minority groups). The issue of class is also discussed -- the article differentiates between East European Jews and other groups, such as Sephardic (from the Iberian peninsula) and Ashkenazic (from Germany) Jews.

Materials:

"Letters from a Bintel Brief", a primary source (widely available -- one source is America Firsthand: Volume II, 3rd ed. Edited by Robert Marcus and David Burner, St. Martin's Press, 1995.)

Hester Street (1975), directed by Joan Micklin Silver. The video is not widely available, but it can be rented commercially and is available in several libraries.

Also helpful in preparation is the article on Hester Street in Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies. (Hester Street is reviewed by Joyce Antler; the book is edited by Mark C. Carnes, and published by Henry Holt in 1995.)

A variety of other resources are mentioned in these publications.

Procedures:

1. Anticipatory set: (Bell ringer)

Ask for students to respond with a short paragraph:

What problems do immigrants face when they first arrive in a country?

2. Ask for several responses, and keep a list on the board or overhead. Answers will vary.

3. Have students read "Letters from a Bintel Brief," using the worksheet provided as a guide.

4. Have students read letters aloud and discuss what specific problems they identified. Were they similar to those they anticipated? How are these problems similar to ones immigrants might face today?

5. Why is the question of whether or not to assimilate to American culture so painful for these immigrants? How did being Jewish make these immigrants particularly isolated? What is the connection between religion and social class? Was assimilation more difficult for men or women? Why?

6. Watch all or portions of Hester Street. This independent film, made in 1975, is based on an 1896 story "Yekl" by Abraham Cahan, the editor of the Bintel Brief. The focus of the movie is the effect of assimilation on a Jewish couple in 1896. The movie is in black and white with some Yiddish subtitles, and it is not really necessary to see the entire film to get the major themes. It is a well crafted period piece, but a little repetitive. The two scenes that can be used to illustrate the ideas are the opening scene at a dance hall, and then a later scene (approximately 35 minutes in) where the main character, named Jake, goes to meet his newly arrived wife and son at Ellis Island. A

major conflict develops over Gitl (the wife) and her "greenhorn" ways, including her persistent wearing of a "sheitel" (wig), which was traditional for Orthodox women. The movie documents the breakdown of the marriage, mainly due to the different pace of assimilation between husband and wife. These gender issues tie in nicely with the letters from a Bintel Brief.

Assessment:

After students watch these scenes (or the entire movie), have them write a journal response from Gitl or Jake to the other. Can their differences be resolved? How?

Extension:

Have students read the article "The Ballad of Leo Frank" in Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America. The story focuses on the 1913 murder trial (and lynching) of Leo Frank, a New York Jew living in Georgia. The case deals with many issues, including regional and class prejudices as well as discrimination based on religion.

The book is part of the series The Shadow of Hate, from the Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Project. The entire package of materials (which include a video and curriculum guide) is available free of charge to schools. (Write to : The Shadow of Hate, Teaching Tolerance, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36104. The Southern Poverty Law Center also has a website.)

Questions from "A Bintel Brief"

1. What does "bintel" translate to in English?
2. In what year was this column first published?
3. In what language was this newspaper written?

With a partner, read three letters from "A Bintel Brief" and answer the following questions on each letter. Each person must complete a worksheet in order to receive credit. (15 points total). Please write your answers on a separate sheet, being sure to label which letter is being answered.

1. List three details about the writer (name, age, gender, country of origin, etc.). Details available will vary.
2. What particular problem is being presented?
3. Do you think that this problem is typical for a new immigrant? Why or why not? Would a new immigrant today face similar problems? Why or why not?
4. What advice would you give to this person?
5. Are these problems generally religious or cultural? Would any immigrant have these problems, or are they typical of Jewish immigrants in particular?
6. Was "Americanization" a good option for these immigrants? Why or why not?

Read the answer to this letter. How does your advice compare to the advice given in the column?

